The sustainability of public sector innovations: the role of feedback, accountability and learning

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1. Introduction

The study of organizational change and innovation has been criticized for various reasons. In 1985, Pettigrew (Pettigrew, 1985) described the study of organizational change and innovation as being largely acontextual, ahistorical and aprocessual. He claimed that cross-sectional analyses were privileged over the more challenging endeavors to understand the dynamics of change across time and space. Since then, scholars such as Van de Ven & Poole (1995) and Weick & Quinn (1999) have demonstrated an increased interest in aspects such as time, process and pace of change and in the sequence of events. However, in 2001, Pettigrew (Pettigrew et al., 2001) still claimed that the field of organizational change was far from mature in understanding the dynamics and effects of time, process, discontinuity, and context. What the organizational change literature needs, according to Pettigrew et al. (2001), is a greater emphasis on the longitudinal study of change processes.

More recently, Pollitt (2011) made an adjoining observation. He comes to the conclusion that "much of the research on innovation has […] focused on the early days – on the moment of innovation itself, what leads up to it, and what makes some innovations 'catch on' by attracting the right kind of 'early adopters'" (Pollitt, 2011, 42). The later stages of their development have, however, been understudied. Therefore, Pollitt invites future research to focus upon questions such as "What proportion of administrative innovation is short-lived?", and "Is there any pattern to those that become perennials rather than fade after the first bloom?" (Pollitt, 2011, 42).

These are exactly the kinds of questions that draw our attention. We are interested in the way in which organizational innovations develop throughout time, and in the mechanisms and processes that are responsible for these developments. This interest is not only driven by the urge to close a gap in the academic body of literature. It is also, and primarily driven by the practical relevance for public managers and policy makers. Indeed, it can be argued that organizational change and innovation might constitute effective ways to achieve improvements in the performance and service levels of public sector organizations. However, as Pollitt rightly points out, administrative innovations and reforms have in the past been known to have faded as fast as they first appeared (Pollitt, 2011). Of course, we do want the public sector to improve itself, but we want to avoid the disruptive effects created by the quick demise and rapid succession of innovations and reforms. In other words, we want innovations to be sustainable.

In order to investigate the development of innovations throughout time, our research focuses on administrative projects or practices which were recognized as 'best practices' by national and international conferences and awards on excellence, innovation and/or quality in the public sector. We claim that these best practices are reasonable proxies for innovations. Indeed, the novelty of the submitted projects is an often-used criterion in the selection procedure for these conferences and awards. In addition, various researchers, mainly from the USA and Canada, have used public service (innovation) awards in academic research on innovations. [1]

The focus of our research on the dependent side of the equation is on the subsequent life courses of these projects and practices after their recognition as best practices. We want to know what happened to these innovations in the medium and longer term: Are they still operational today or have they ceased to exist? Were they actively and explicitly terminated or did they just fade away?

[1] See for example: Borins, 2000, 2001, 2008; Gow, 1992; Glor, 1998; Rangarajan, 2008; Golden, 1990; Bernier et al., 2014.

Did they survive in their original form or were they transformed over the years? And finally, were they adopted by other organizations? These questions will be addressed through an online survey among the best practice cases in our database.

On the independent side of the equation, we were inspired by a suggestion made by Pettigrew et al. (2001). These authors make the observation that there is a hunger among the practitioners of change to know whether those processes and mechanisms that are responsible for initiating change are similar to or different from those responsible for sustaining or regenerating organizational change. Building on this observation, we present a conceptual framework with three main dimensions: feedback, accountability, and learning. The literature suggests that these processes and mechanisms play an important role in the initiation of change. We are interested to know if they also play a decisive role in sustaining or regenerating change, and if so, in what way.

On the basis of an extensive literature review, we have found theoretical and empirical arguments supporting the thesis that feedback, accountability and learning might play a decisive role in the patterns of change and innovation within public sector organizations. In short, these arguments come down to this:

- Feedback information allows an organization to correct its errors, to adjust its goals, to restore its performance levels, and to align itself with its environment (Van der Knaap, 1995; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Morgan, 2006; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Downs, 1967; Walker, 2013).
- An organization which is characterized by a learning culture, has an open and receptive attitude towards different opinions and alternative ways of doing things, and has a tolerance for errors and risk-taking. Ideally, this open mindset is supplemented with structural and procedural arrangements that allow organizations to actively search for and process relevant feedback information, and to share this information within the organization and beyond (Garvin et al., 2008; Popper & Lipshitz, 2000; Greiling & Halachmi, 2013).
- Finally, accountability mechanisms, more specifically the public nature of the account giving and the possibility of sanctions, may provide the incentive for public officials to actually make changes in order to improve the performance of their organization (Bovens et al., 2008; Wynen et al., 2014).[2]

Our expectation is that different constellations of these three dimensions at the level of the organization will lead to different patterns of change and innovation. Talking about the patterns of change and innovation, we refer on the one hand to the eventual (non-)survival and/or dissemination of the best practices. But on the other hand, we also refer to the patterns leading up to this fate. In this context, we can refer to the interesting distinction made *inter alia* by Weick & Quinn (1999) between episodic and continuous change.

It is our intention to describe the patterns of change and innovation for the best practices in our database, and to investigate if these different patterns can be linked with different constellations of the three dimensions at the independent side of the equation. For this purpose, we have developed these three dimensions into several sub-dimensions, and we have tried to make these measurable by translating them into survey questions. In addition, and as stated before, we developed a number of survey questions inquiring about the subsequent life courses of the best practice cases.

[2] However, an accountability regime which focuses too harshly on mistakes and sanctions may discourage entrepreneurship, risk-taking, initiative and creativity, and instead may provoke defensive routines, paralysis and window-dressing (Van Loocke & Put, 2011; Bovens, 2005; Bovens et al., 2008; Behn, 2001; Hartley, 2005).

The bulk of this paper is devoted to the elaboration of our conceptual framework. In the first paragraph of the theoretical section, we dwell on the importance of feedback information for organizational change and improvement. The second paragraph sums up a number of inertial forces, i.e. characteristics of public sector organizations that might inhibit organizational change. In the third paragraph of the theoretical section, it is suggested that the introduction of a number of conditions might counteract or offset these inertial biases. We will focus, more specifically on two clusters of conditions, which we have labelled 'learning organization attributes' on the one hand, and 'public accountability' on the other. The remainder of this contribution is devoted to the description of our research population and to the introduction of the survey tool that we developed. The actual analysis of the survey data falls outside of the scope of this paper.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. The logic of change: restoring or improving performance on the basis of feedback information

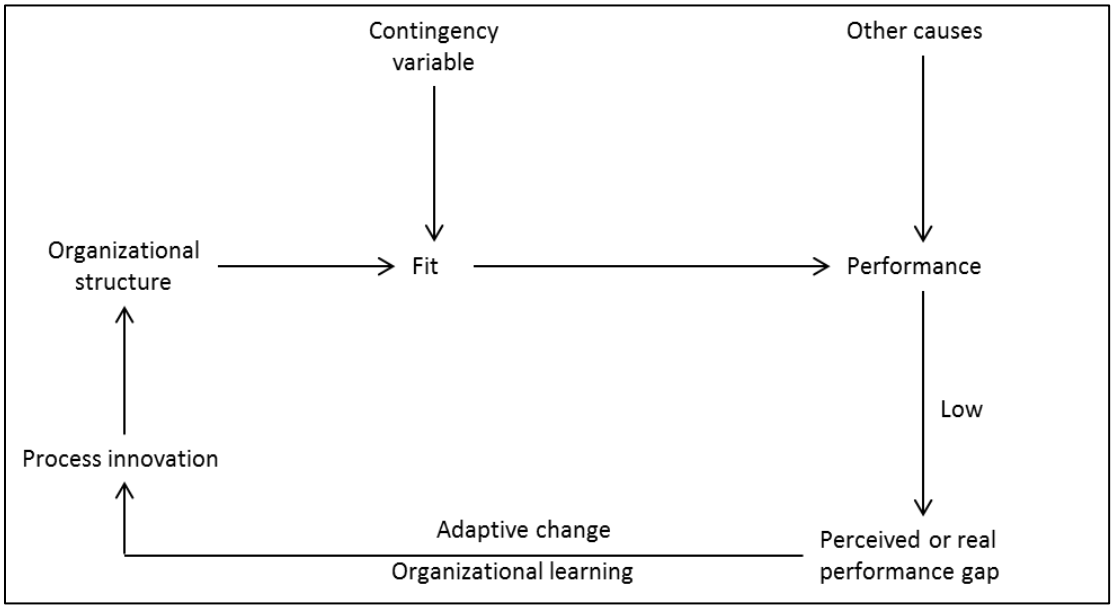
Many theorists have tried to explain the logics of organizational change and continuity. Several of them stress the importance of feedback information for organizational change and improvement: feedback information allows an organization to correct its errors (cf. single loop learning), to adjust its goals (cf. double loop learning), to restore its performance levels (cf. Downs), and to align itself with its environment (cf. open systems approach & structural contingency theory). In the next paragraphs, we will describe the essence of these theories.

2.1.1. The open systems approach & structural contingency theory

The open systems approach is based on the principle that organizations are, just like organisms, open to their environment and that – in order to survive – they must achieve an appropriate relation with that environment; they must interact with it and they must adapt to it (Morgan, 2006; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Daft, 1995). In the open systems approach, much attention is devoted to the relationship between the organization and its environment. A dominant principle is that organizations have to adapt themselves to their environments if they are to survive. Organizations have to align with their environments to remain competitive (Fiol & Lyles, 1985).

The principle of organizational adaptation is also reflected in contingency theory. This theoretical current asserts that there is no one ideal way of organizing. The appropriate form depends on the kind of task or environment with which one is dealing (Morgan, 2006). Contingency theory argues that the most appropriate structure for an organization is the one that best fits a given operating contingency, such as the nature of the task or the environment with which the organization is dealing (Lam, 2006; Morgan, 2006). At the center of contingency theory is the notion of 'fit'. Fit between structure and key contingencies results in higher performance. Walker (2013) argues that organizational change and innovation may assist at achieving this fit by adapting structures to new circumstances. Figure 1 shows Donaldson's (2001) 'structural adaptation to regain fit' model, edited by Walker (2013) to include innovation.

Figure 1. 'Structural adaptation to regain fit'-model



Source: Walker, 2013, 18.

The figure suggests that the relationship between structure and contingency moderates the achievement of acceptable levels of performance. When contingencies change while the organizational structure remains unmodified, this may result in misfit and reduced performance. As performance falls to unacceptable levels, the organization must make adaptive changes: a new structure must be sought in order to bring the organization back into fit, thereby restoring performance levels (Walker, 2013).

2.1.2. The basic dynamics of search and change according to Anthony Downs (1967)

According to Downs (1967), organizational change is closely related with information seeking. He sets forth a basic model of search and change for both individuals and organizations. For our purposes, we will focus on the level of the organization. The basic model is a theory of dynamic equilibrium involving the following hypotheses:

- All organizations are continuously engaged in scanning their immediate environment to some degree. They constantly receive a certain amount of information from their environments. This stream of information comes to them without specific effort on their part to obtain it. This constitutes a minimal degree of constant, 'automatic' search.
- Each organization sets a level of performance it aspires to achieve. Organizations can choose different aspiration levels. A wide range of internal and external pressures will play a role in determining the aspiration level.
- Whenever the performance level of the organization drops below the aspiration level, the organization will be motivated to search more intensively for alternative ways of organizing its business. Indeed, the perceived performance gap creates dissatisfaction, which incites the organization to intensify its normal search and to direct it specifically at alternatives likely to close the performance gap. Other things being equal, the organization will select the alternative that involves the least profound change in its structure.

- Once the organization has adopted a new course of action, enabling it to regain or surpass its original performance level, it will reduce its search efforts back to their normal, automatic degree of intensity.
- If the intensified search fails to reveal any ways the organization can return to its original level of performance, the organization will eventually adjust its aspiration level downwards, to the highest level of performance it can attain.
- When an organization is achieving its aspiration level, it is in a state of equilibrium. The organization is maximizing its utility in the light of its existing knowledge. The organization is not motivated to search for alternative ways to organize its business.
- There is only one exception, namely when the constant, automatic search process by chance reveals an alternative that might allow the organization to move to an even higher level of performance. This possibility creates a potential performance gap and motivates the organization to explore this alternative. If the intensified search reveals that the organization can indeed improve its performance by shifting to the alternative, the organization will make the shift. Once the organization has adopted the new course of action, the new higher performance level will be regarded as the aspiration level.

2.1.3. Cybernetic models of self-regulation: detection and correction of errors based on feedback

The term 'cybernetics' was first used in the 1940s by MIT mathematician Norbert Wiener. The term is used to refer to processes of information exchange, including in particular negative feedback, through which machines and organisms engage in self-regulating behaviors in order to maintain steady states. The concept of negative feedback is closely related to the detection and correction of error (Morgan, 2006). The main principle guiding the cybernetic system perspective, is this: if a cybernetic system is capable of obtaining feedback information about the outcomes and effectiveness of its actions, it is capable of correcting its errors and improving its overall functioning (Van der Knaap, 1995).

Most cybernetic models of self-regulation are driven by the philosophy of a dual process system: a higher order mechanism that monitors and exerts control over a lower order mechanism. We can illustrate this by referring to the functioning of a thermostat. The thermostat (the higher order) mechanism, monitors the temperature in a room and is programmed to initiate a heating mechanism (the lower order mechanism), if and when the temperature drops below a set lower limit, and to stop the heating mechanism if and when the temperature rises above a set upper limit (Wang & Mukhopadhyay, 2012). Any cybernetic system is thus based on four key principles (Morgan, 2006):

- The capacity to monitor significant aspects of the environment
- The ability to relate this information to the operating norms / standards / reference values
- The ability to detect significant discrepancies between the current state and the norm
- The ability to initiate corrective action in order to reduce the discrepancies

Similarly, Porter, Lawler & Hackman (1975) specify four basic elements as critical:

- Standards or specified objectives
- Monitoring devices to measure current performance
- Comparing devices to compare actual performance with stated objectives
- Action devices to reduce possible discrepancies between objectives and actual performance

The most simple cybernetic systems, such as house thermostats, can maintain only the course of action determined by the operating norms or standards guiding it. They are unable to question the appropriateness of what they are doing. More complex cybernetic systems are able to detect and correct errors in operating norms and thus influence the standards that guide their detailed operations (Morgan, 2006). It is this kind of self-questioning ability that constitutes the fundamental distinction between single-loop and double-loop learning.

The distinction between single-loop and double-loop learning was introduced by Argyris & Schön (1978). Single-loop learning occurs on the basis of goal-seeking or confirmatory feedback. This kind of feedback gives information about the degree to which the stated goals are achieved. It does not challenge the purpose of the system: goals, beliefs, values and conceptual frameworks ('the governing values' or 'the operating norms') are taken for granted without critical reflection. The emphasis is on 'techniques and making techniques more efficient' (Usher and Bryant, 1989, p. 87). Questions that may be asked are: Could we do what we are currently doing in more productive ways, doing it cheaper, using alternative methods or approaches for the same objectives? (Van der Knaap, 1995; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Argyris & Schön, 1978).

If we look deeper, however, we may find that what went wrong, did so because of the way the system is designed. An alternative and more sophisticated response, therefore, is to question the relevance and appropriateness of the governing variables themselves, to subject them to critical reflection. This is described by Argyris and Schön as double-loop learning. Double-loop learning occurs on the basis of goal-changing or innovative feedback. It pertains to the detection and correction of errors in ways that involve the modification of an organization's underlying norms, assumptions, policies and objectives. It may lead to discontinuous change and innovation (Van der Knaap, 1995; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Argyris & Schön, 1978).

2.2. Forces that impede change

Thus, several theories stress the importance of feedback information for organizational change and improvement: feedback information allows an organization to correct its errors (cf. single loop learning), to adjust its goals (cf. double loop learning), to restore its performance levels (cf. Downs), and to align itself with its environment (cf. open systems approach & structural contingency theory). The word 'allow' is used very deliberately here. Indeed, the availability of feedback information might be a necessary condition for organizational change and improvement to occur. But for several reasons, we believe that public sector organizations are disinclined to change, and therefore, we do not expect the mere presence of feedback information to be a sufficient condition for the occurrence of organization change. In the next paragraph, we will describe a number of these inertial forces.

a. Lack of competition

Many observers indicate that competition is one of the most important incentives for improvement and innovation. Organizations in a competitive environment can only survive if they are able to create new products, new services, more efficient production methods, better and more efficient ways of delivering services, and so on. Public sector organizations, however, are often in a monopolistic position. Citizens often have no choice but to be client of the public organization in question. It is argued that since the public sector lacks competition, it also lacks incentives to improve and to innovate (Bekkers et al., 2011).

b. Risk-avoidance

Learning and change often come about through a risky process, involving experimentation, trial and error, and uncertain outcomes (Pollitt, 2011; Levitt & March, 1988; Bekkers et al., 2013; Brown & Osborne, 2013). As a consequence, mistakes and failures are part of most learning and change processes (Bekkers et al., 2013; Hartley, 2005). However, risk and risk-taking are generally negatively perceived by public sector organizations (Downs, 1967; Bekkers et al., 2011). The reasons for this are obvious. First of all, it is very hard for politicians and public managers to persuade the media and the general public that it is acceptable, in certain contexts and under certain conditions, to spend public money on things that turn out to be failures (Pollitt, 2011).

Secondly, decision-makers and implementers carry responsibility for failure. They are often harshly penalized for failures, both by public accountability mechanisms and by the media (Pollitt, 2011; Gilson et al., 2009). As a consequence, politicians and public managers are cautious to support radical changes because there is a risk of failure, and hence a risk of getting blamed and penalized. Risk-, error-, and blame-avoidance thus become central characteristics of the public sector: public managers tend to make safe decisions in order to avoid risk and blame (Howlett, 2012; Bernier et al., 2007; Gilson et al., 2009; Bekkers et al., 2011).

c. Rule-obsession

The public sector is dominated by a bureaucratic culture in which compliance with rules and procedures is highly valued. Because of this focus on rules and procedures, specific rule-driven path-dependencies may emerge which limit the way in which new concepts, methods, technologies and processes are accepted (Bekkers et al., 2011). Public sector organizations may find themselves in a virtual straitjacket of rules hardly conducive to flexible behavior (Downs, 1967).

d. The sunk costs of previous investments

Organizations, not only public sector organizations, have a powerful tendency to continue doing today whatever they did yesterday. The main reason for this inertia is that established processes represent an enormous previous investment in time, effort, and money. This investment constitutes a sunk cost. If an organization adopts a new course of action, it must incur at least some of these costs all over again. Obviously, the resulting inertia will be stronger as the pursued change is more profound (Downs, 1967).

e. Shared mental models, dominant worldviews, and 'blind spots' in organizational decision-making

Individuals develop mental models, belief systems, and knowledge structures that they use to perceive, construct, and make sense of their worlds and to make decisions about what actions to take. Similarly, organizations develop collective or shared mental models and interpretative schemes which influence managerial decision making and organizational action, and which guide the problem-solving activities and patterns of interaction among their members (Lam, 2006).

These shared mental models and interpretative schemes are the result of social interactions between organizational actors (Mariotti, 2012): social processes within organizations are crucial in the formation of collective cognition and knowledge structures (Lam, 2006). Organizations are seen as consisting of groups of individuals that collectively try to make sense of a complex reality in their

daily work activities (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Weick, 1995). For example, as the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998), and Brown and Duguid (1991; 1998) suggests, organizational members construct their shared mental models and perspectives through "practice", that is shared work experiences (Lam, 2006; Holmqvist, 2003).

Scholars have examined how these shared mental models affect organizational adaptiveness. Some argue that shared interpretative schemes facilitate an organization's capacity to process and interpret information in a purposeful manner, and to share knowledge, thereby aiding learning and joint problem solving and, hence, enhancing its adaptive potential (Lam, 2006).

Others, however, claim that organizational interpretative schemes can create "blind spots" in organizational decision making and block organizational change. They argue that organizations tend to persist in what they do because learning and knowledge are embedded in social relationships, shared cognition, and existing ways of doing things. As a consequence, organizations may find it difficult to unlearn past practices and explore alternative ways of doing things (Lam, 2006). Moreover, an organization is usually formally controlled by a dominant group, which generally has the legitimate right to select, promote, demote and dismiss organizational members (March & Simon, 1958; Simon, 1997). This becomes the essence of maintaining particular worldviews, norms, traditions, and other organizational rules — which are specific ways of interpreting experiences (March, 1994; Holmqvist, 2003).

2.3. Conditions that are conducive to change

As a result of the mechanisms described above, public sector organizations are biased towards inertia rather than towards change. To offset these biases, scholars have put forward a great number of suggestions. These suggestions consist of the introduction of conditions that are conducive to change. In the following paragraphs, we would like to focus on two clusters of conditions. The first cluster can be labelled 'learning organization attributes'. The second cluster can be labelled 'public accountability'.

2.3.1. The learning organization

As we have discussed above, organizations tend to persist in what they do because organizational learning and knowledge are embedded in social relationships, shared cognition, and existing ways of doing things (Lam, 2006). In response to this, a number of authors suggests that there should be a sound balance between the exploitation of existing knowledge and competences, on the one hand, and the exploration, integration and/or insertion of new ideas, knowledge, expertise and competences from outside the organization, on the other.

Exploitation refers to the refinement of existing organizational knowledge and capabilities. Exploitation is about creating reliability in experience. It means productivity, refinement, routinization, production, and elaboration of existing experiences (Holmqvist, 2003). The exploitation of existing knowledge and competences may enable organizations to recombine existing knowledge and generate new applications from its existing knowledge base. This will most likely result in cumulative learning, which is continuous but incremental (Lam, 2006). At the same time, however,

the very same learning processes contribute to an increased simple-mindedness, and a concomitant inability to explore new opportunities (Holmqvist, 2003).

In order to counteract the potential drawbacks of exploitation, some authors suggest that organizations need to create variety in their experiences as well, by experimenting, innovating and taking risks. This is the process of exploration (Levinthal & March, 1993; Olsen & Peters, 1996; Holmqvist, 2003). The inflow of new knowledge and ideas may enable organizations to generate radical new products and processes. Sources from outside the organization are often thought to be in a better position to challenge existing perspectives and paradigms (Lam, 2006). In addition, Foldy (2004) argues that cultural diversity in an organization's workforce enhances organizational performance. Indeed, culturally heterogeneous groups contribute to functional diversity, which, in turn, increases the prevalence of alternative perspectives and new ideas.

The literature about exploitation and exploration is closely related to the literature about the learning organization. Garvin et al. (2008) define a learning organization as "an organization made up of employees skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge." These people could help their firms cultivate tolerance for alternative perspectives, foster open discussion, think holistically and systematically, and adapt to their changing environments (Garvin et al., 2008). The topic of the learning organization has been touched upon by many scholars. In the next paragraph, we will briefly explain the most frequently mentioned attributes of a learning organization.

a. Psychological safety – tolerance for errors, risk-taking and experimentation – transparency

According to Edmondson (1999), team psychological safety refers to "a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up" (Edmondson, 1999, 354). Most people want to preserve the (positive) image that others hold of them. Therefore, they will avoid exhibiting risky behaviors such as asking questions, admitting or calling attention to mistakes, overtly reflecting critically, giving feedback, etc. in order to avoid being seen as ignorant, incompetent, negative or disruptive (Decuyper et al., 2010). Nevertheless, these risky behaviors are critical for organizational learning.

Indeed, as discussed earlier, learning and change often come about through a risky process, involving experimentation, trial and error, and uncertain outcomes (Pollitt, 2011; Levitt & March, 1988; Bekkers et al., 2013; Brown & Osborne, 2013). As a consequence, mistakes and failures are part of most learning and change processes (Bekkers et al., 2013; Hartley, 2005). If the employees of an organization are harshly punished for making mistakes or errors, they will avoid taking risks and they will stop experimenting with alternative ways to organize their business.

Also, according to cybernetics, learning involves the detection and correction of error on the basis of feedback information. However, when errors and failures are harshly sanctioned, the employees of the organization will not own up to their mistakes. As a consequence, errors will remain undetected, and uncorrected (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Psychological safety should facilitate transparency about errors and mistakes because it alleviates excessive concern about the reactions of others (Edmondson, 1999).

In short, learning thrives in a safe environment where trial and error can take place without the threat of sanctions for making mistakes or errors (Bekkers et al., 2013; Friedman, Lipshitz & Overmeer, 2003; Greiling & Halachmi, 2013; Garvin et al., 2008)

b. Culture of adversarial debate and openness for alternative perspectives

Learning occurs when people become aware of opposing ideas (Garvin et al., 2008). Indeed, studied from a social perspective, learning depends on communication. In a dialogue or a debate, opinions may be tested and verified, alternative viewpoints may be confronted, and mutual efforts of persuasion and argumentation may be made. In this way, the individuals participating in the dialectic connection are stimulated to reflect on their existing cognitive schemata, which may lead to new insights (Van der Knaap, 1995). As a consequence, learning will thrive in an organization that stimulates or at least tolerates the questioning and criticizing of well-established perspectives and long-held assumptions (Greiling & Halachmi, 2013; Garvin et al., 2008).

In this context, it is important to mention the potential impact of top management endorsement and commitment to organizational learning (Greiling & Halachmi, 2013). Garvin et al. (2008) claim that organizational learning is strongly influenced by the behavior of leaders. When leaders demonstrate through their own behavior a willingness to consider alternative points of view, employees feel encouraged to offer new ideas and options (Garvin et al., 2008).

Equally important to mention, is the argument, put forward by Foldy (2004) and Bekkers et al. (2013) that cultural (or professional) diversity in the workforce of an organization has the potential to foster the confrontation of alternative viewpoints, and hence, to stimulate organizational learning.

c. Time for reflection – slack learning

When people are too busy or overstressed, their ability to think analytically and creatively is compromised. They become less able to diagnose problems and learn from their experiences. Supportive learning environments allow time for a pause in the action and encourage thoughtful review of the organization's processes (Garvin et al., 2008). This is what has been called slack search. Slack search occurs when staff in the organization have sufficient time (and perhaps other resources such as skills) to be able to reflect on what they are doing and to experiment with alternative ways of organizing their business (Gilson et al., 2009; Bekkers et al., 2013).

d. Structural and procedural arrangements

Ideally, the open mindset, which is characteristic of a learning culture, is supplemented with structural and procedural arrangements that allow organizational members to generate, collect, analyze, interpret, store, disseminate and use information and knowledge (Popper & Lipshitz, 2000; Garvin et al., 2008).

The active measurement and regular review of a wide spectrum of performances is a crucial element, which, of course, has to be accompanied by disciplined analysis and interpretation of the data to identify and solve problems (Barrados & Mayne, 2003; Greiling & Halachmi, 2013; Garvin et al., 2008). Such arrangements may include: performance and quality management systems; internal audits; structural arrangements to take in and analyze the feedback of personnel, clients, or other experts, such as external auditors and ombudsmen; etc.

Systematic knowledge management is another crucial element. Indeed, for maximum impact, knowledge and information must be recorded and stored in retrievable ways, and widely disseminated within the organization and beyond. This includes structural arrangements such as forums and platforms that allow the exchange of knowledge and experiences with other (public sector) organizations. Indeed, in the public sector, inter-organizational learning might be equally important as intra-organizational learning (Hartley & Benington, 2006; Garvin et al., 2008; Downe, Hartley & Rashman, 2004).

Figure 2. Attributes of the learning organization

- Psychological and cultural factors
  - Psychological safety
  - Tolerance for errors, risk-taking and experimentation
  - Transparency: honest and unbiased information disclosure
  - Culture of adversarial debate and openness for alternative perspectives
- Top management inducement of organizational learning culture
- Organizational capacity and resources
  - Diversity of staff
  - Time for reflection – slack learning
- Structural and procedural arrangements
  - Deliberate measurement practices: active measurement and regular review of a wide spectrum of performance
  - Disciplined analysis and interpretation to identify and solve problems
  - Systematic knowledge management

2.3.2. Public accountability

Some authors suggest that accountability mechanisms may help to encourage and promote learning in pursuit of continuous improvement in public governance and public management (Schillemans, Van Twist & Vanhommerig, 2013; Aucoin & Heintzman, 2000; Bovens, 2005a; Bovens, Schillemans & 't Hart, 2008). Indeed, in the accountability literature, it is argued that a public accountability arrangement, if organized in an appropriate way, confronts public managers on a regular basis with feedback information about their own organization and stimulates both 'accountors' and 'accountees' to reflect upon and to debate about the successes and failures of past policies, both separately and in dialogue with one another (Bovens, 2005b, 47; Bovens, Schillemans & 't Hart, 2008, 233). Moreover, the public nature of the account giving and the possibility of sanctions in the event of shortcomings may provide public managers with the right incentives to search for more intelligent, effective or efficient ways to organize their business (Bovens, Schillemans & 't Hart, 2008).

In the next paragraphs, we will briefly dwell on the concept of public accountability, its classifications, and its functions. Next, we will explain in more detail the reasons why accountability mechanisms might promote learning and improvement in public governance and public management. To conclude, we list a number of reasons why public accountability mechanisms might be detrimental to learning and innovation.

a. The concept of public accountability

A distinction can be made between accountability as a virtue and accountability as a social relation or a mechanism. Accountability used in the sense of virtue refers to substantive norms for the evaluation of the behavior of actors. 'Being accountable' or 'acting in an accountable way' is seen as a positive feature of public officials or organizations. It comes close to being responsive and responsible, and being willing to act in a transparent, fair, and equitable way. Accountability defined

as a social relationship or mechanism, on the other hand, refers to 'being held accountable' and involves an obligation of an actor to explain and justify its conduct to a significant other (Schillemans & Bovens, 2011). In this contribution, we will use accountability in the latter sense.

Many authors have offered theoretical contributions and definitions of accountability. We will use the influential definition of the 'Utrecht School' of accountability[3]. In their view, accountability can be defined as a relationship between an actor (who can be either an individual person or an organization) and a forum (which can be either an individual person, an organization or a virtual entity (e.g. a god)) in which the actor has or feels an obligation (which can be either formal, informal or even self-imposed) to explain and justify his or her conduct to the forum, in which the forum can pose additional questions and pass judgment, after which the actor may face consequences (Bovens, Schillemans & 't Hart, 2008, 225).

This definition reveals at least three elements of an account giving relationship: information, debate and judgment. The element of information implies that the actor has or feels an obligation to inform the forum about his or her conduct. In case of failure or incident, this often involves explanation and justification. In response, the forum may interrogate the actor about the quality and adequacy of the information or the appropriateness and legitimacy of the conduct. Finally, it is not unusual that the forum passes a judgment on the conduct of the actor. Furthermore, a negative verdict by the forum may result in a some sort of sanction (Bovens, 2005a).

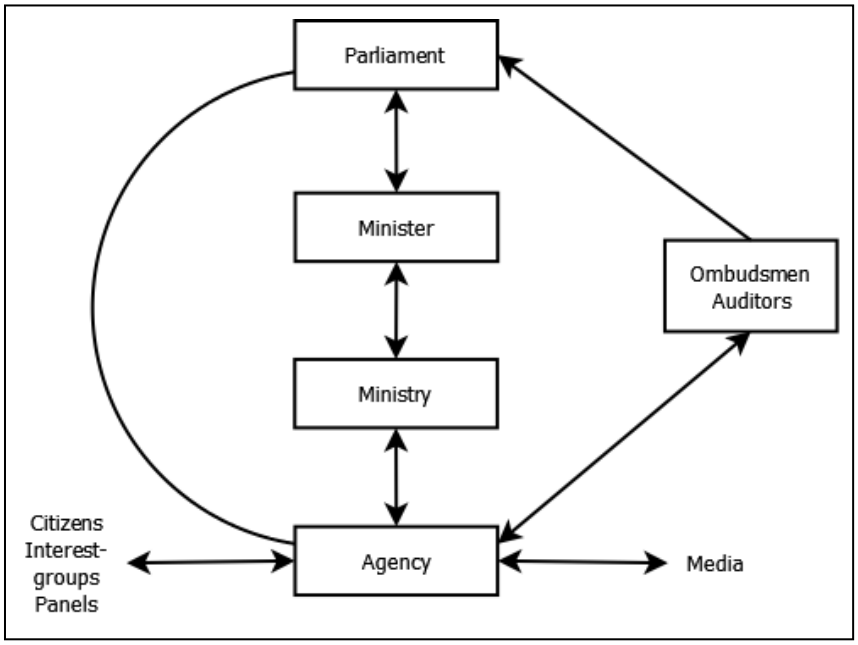
b. Classifications of types of accountability

On the basis of the type of forum, a classification of types of accountability can be made. Bovens (2005a and 2005b) distinguishes between (1) political accountability: account giving along the chain of political principal-agent relationships, that is to say towards ministers, elected representatives, and ultimately voters; (2) legal accountability: account giving towards civil or administrative courts; (3) administrative accountability: account giving towards auditors, ombudsmen, inspectors and controllers; (4) professional accountability: account giving towards (associations of) professional peers; and (5) societal accountability: account giving towards citizens, interest groups, the media.

For the purpose of this paper, we are mainly interested in political and administrative accountability. Political accountability is a vertical type of accountability. This means that the forum has formal and hierarchical powers over the actor and can force the actor to give account. Administrative accountability mechanisms on the other hand are often diagonal forms of accountability. This means that there is neither a strict hierarchical relationship, nor pure voluntariness (Bovens, 2005b). For example, ombudsmen and audit institutions are often charged by a political principal (a minister or parliament) to exercise some kind of oversight over an agent and to report their findings to the principal. There is, however, no direct hierarchical relationship between the ombudsman or the auditor and the organization under scrutiny (Bovens, 2005b). Typically, ombudsman and audit offices do not have the right to sanction the agents for their actions or to coerce them into compliance. However, they can often use the courts to sanction agents if they fail to provide the requested information or explanations (Lindberg, 2013).

[3] Mark Bovens and his colleagues Thomas Schillemans and Paul 't Hart.

Figure 3. Vertical, horizontal and diagonal accountability



Source: Bovens, 2005a, 197.

c. The functions of accountability mechanisms

Central to the concept of accountability, is the idea that when decision-making power is transferred from a principal to an agent, there must be a mechanism in place for holding the agent accountable for its decisions and if necessary to sanction the agent (Lindberg, 2013). Therefore, the first function of public accountability is democratic control and oversight by the political principal over the delegated powers exercised by their agents. A second function of public accountability is to protect and/or enhance the integrity of public governance. By securing information disclosure and justification, public managers are deterred from misusing their delegated powers (Bovens, 2005a). A third function is the learning and improvement function of accountability mechanisms (Aucoin & Heintzman, 2000). In this perspective, accountability is seen as a tool that allows and motivates public organizations to learn from their mistakes and successes, and thus to improve their future performance (Schillemans, Van Twist & Vanhommerig, 2013). This function is of particular interest for this paper. In the next paragraphs, we will explore in what ways accountability arrangements can foster learning behavior and improvement in public sector organizations.

d. Feedback information, reflection, and debate

First of all, the accountability arrangement, if organized in an appropriate way, may provide a setting and a set of interaction routines which induce an ongoing, consequential dialogue among executive actors and key stakeholders about performance feedback. This way, both 'accountors' and 'accountees' are stimulated to reflect upon and to debate about the successes and failures of past policies (Bovens, Schillemans & 't Hart, 2008).

The potential contribution to organizational change and improvement is obvious. Indeed, by reflecting on their past actions, public organizations can learn from their mistakes and successes, and thus improve their future performance (Schillemans, Van Twist & Vanhommerig, 2013). Furthermore, by introducing a potential dissonant voice in the dialogue, the forum might break the

possible conformist patterns of thought that might exist within the organization under scrutiny (D'hoedt & Bouckaert, 2011). Indeed, organizations tend to persist in what they do because learning and knowledge are embedded in social relationships, shared cognition, and existing ways of doing things. Sources from outside the organization are often thought to be in a better position to challenge existing perspectives and paradigms, and to question long-held assumptions and behaviors (Lam, 2006; Salge & Vera, 2012). Accountability mechanisms such as ombudsmen and audit offices, which are thought to be independent institutions, seem to be in an appropriate position to provide such a voice if necessary. In short, accountability mechanisms may induce openness and reflexivity in political and administrative systems that might otherwise be primarily inward-looking (In 't Veld et al., 1991).

Promising as this may sound, however, the possibility of reflection and debate will only materialize if the organization under scrutiny has a culture of adversarial debate and a receptive attitude towards alternative perspectives (cf. § 2.3.1.b). If not, the organization and its managers may resort to defensive routines. Indeed, the possibilities of dialogue, confrontation of viewpoints, and learning may be compromised by what Argyris (1987) has called defensive routines. In order to prevent the experience of embarrassment or threat, people tend to take refuge in defensive routines, which are concealing practices to obstruct the confrontation of viewpoints (Morgan, 2006). For example, assessments made by the forum may be challenged, and what is learned may be ignored (Aucoin & Heintzman, 2000).

e. Incentives to pursue actual improvements and changes

The confrontation with feedback information and alternative viewpoints, and the provocation of reflection and debate may contribute to the cognitive development of public sector organizations: i.e. the developments of insights and cognitive associations, change in states of knowledge, and increased understanding of causal relationships. However, new insights and ideas are not always turned into new practices. A necessary condition for the conversion of new ideas into new practices is the willingness of public sector organizations to improve.

As discussed before, many observers indicate that competition is one of the most important incentives for improvement and change. Since the public sector lacks competition, it is argued that it also lacks incentives to improve and to innovate. Some scholars disagree however. They indicate that, although government is mainly in a monopolistic position, there is a trend of increasing market-like competition in the public sector. For example, due to the privatization and liberalization of specific service domains, which were formerly the exclusive terrain of government, public sector organizations increasingly have to compete with private organizations. As a consequence, public sector organizations increasingly have to pay attention to the quality, effectiveness, efficiency and responsiveness of their services in order to survive. Secondly, there is an increased competition between regions and cities in terms of being an attractive place to work, live or visit. The quality of services is an important source of competitive advantage is this contest (Bekkers et al., 2013).

Moreover, several arrangements have been developed that make the quality and outcomes of public services more transparent. As a consequence, the performances of public sector entities are increasingly subject to comparison, both within the public sector and between the public and the private sector. Obvious examples of such arrangements are benchmarking systems and league tables (Bekkers et al., 2013). However, public accountability arrangements such as ombudsmen and audit offices may also provide such transparency. Indeed, the account giving is done in public, meaning

that it is open or at least accessible to citizens (Bovens, 2005a). The fact that the quality and outcomes of public services and policies are made transparent, in combination with the increase of (quasi-)competitive elements in the public sector, may act as an incentive for service improvements (Bekkers et al., 2013).

Not only the public nature of the account giving may constitute an incentive for public managers to do better. The possibility of sanctions in the event of errors and shortcomings may also motivate public authorities to search for more intelligent ways of organizing their business (Bovens, Schillemans & 't Hart, 2008). This argument was worked out in a detailed fashion by Wynen, Verhoest, Ongaro & van Thiel (2014). In fact, Wynen et al. assert that this idea is at the core of NPM:

> "In exchange for autonomy, public organizations (or their CEOs) would be held accountable by their minister and parliament for their performance and sanctioned or rewarded accordingly. […]. It was believed that an increase in managerial autonomy combined with result control would, among others, stimulate a more innovation-oriented culture and ultimately lead to an increase of performance." (Wynen et al., 2014, 45)

In essence, the argument can be summarized as 'letting managers manage', and 'making managers manage'. Managerial autonomy provides public managers with the possibility and the latitude to experiment, to innovate, and to manage. As a complement, result control provides public managers with the pressure and the incentive to do so. Indeed, holding agencies accountable for their performance and linking result-achievement with sanctions and rewards encourages or even forces managers to strive for increased levels of efficiency and service quality, leading to a search for innovative ways to deliver services and to organize processes (Wynen et al., 2014).

f. The dysfunctions of accountability mechanisms

Thus far, we have discussed the possible ways in which (administrative) accountability mechanisms may contribute to learning, improvement, and change in public sector organizations. We should, however, take into account that accountability mechanisms, when organized in an inappropriate way, may also have detrimental effects on learning, improvement, and change. In this paragraph, we will briefly discuss some possible dysfunctions of accountability mechanisms, insofar as they are relevant to the goal of learning and improving.

- Rigidity and paralysis. An accountability regime which is too rigorous and focuses too harshly on mistakes and sanctions, may discourage entrepreneurship, risk-taking, initiative and creativity. Learning and change often come about through a risky process, involving experimentation, trial and error, and uncertain outcomes (Pollitt, 2011; Levitt & March, 1988; Bekkers et al., 2013; Brown & Osborne, 2013). As a consequence, mistakes and failures are part of most learning and change processes (Bekkers et al., 2013; Hartley, 2005). When an accountability mechanism focuses to harshly on sanctions for making 'mistakes' or for not realizing immediate results, public managers will learn to avoid risk-taking, and to shield themselves against potential mistakes and criticism (Van Loocke & Put, 2011; Bovens, 2005a; Behn, 2001; Bekkers et al., 2013; Hartley, 2005).
- Perverted behavior and window dressing. An accountability regime which is too rigorous, may encourage perverted behavior. Public managers may get better at fulfilling the requirements imposed by their accountability forums. However this does not necessarily mean that the actual performance of these public organizations in terms of policy-making

and public service delivery will also improve. The managers may create a façade of plans, procedures and goals to satisfy the forum, while behind the façade, everything continues as before (Van Loocke & Put, 2011; Bovens, Schillemans & 't Hart, 2008).

- Conflicting expectations. Actors may be confronted with different accountability forums, each with its own set of evaluation criteria. These sets may be partially overlapping, but also partially diverging, and even mutually contradictory. It may be difficult to combine these different expectations or to prioritize between them. Organizations trying to meet conflicting expectations are likely to be dysfunctional, pleasing no one while trying to please everyone. They tend to oscillate between behaviors consistent with conflicting notions of accountability (Schillemans & Bovens, 2011; Koppell, 2005; Bovens, Schillemans & 't Hart, 2008).

2.4. Summary of the conceptual framework

Our conceptual framework can be summarized as follows:

- Feedback information allows an organization to correct its errors, to adjust its goals, to restore its performance levels, and to align itself with its environment (Van der Knaap, 1995; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Morgan, 2006; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Downs, 1967; Walker, 2013).
- An organization which is characterized by a learning culture, has an open and receptive attitude towards different opinions and alternative ways of doing things, and has a tolerance for errors and risk-taking. Ideally, this open mindset is supplemented with structural and procedural arrangements that allow organizations to actively search for and process relevant feedback information, and to share this information within the organization and beyond (Garvin et al., 2008; Popper & Lipshitz, 2000; Greiling & Halachmi, 2013).
- Finally, accountability mechanisms, more specifically the public nature of the account giving and the possibility of sanctions, may provide the incentive for public officials to actually make changes in order to improve the performance of their organization (Bovens et al., 2008; Wynen et al., 2014).[4]

2.5. Theoretical expectations

The literature suggests that these processes and mechanisms play an important role in the initiation of change. We are interested to know if they also play a decisive role in sustaining or regenerating change, and if so, in what way. However, this area of research is largely uncharted and unexplored. Therefore, it is not evident to formulate clear hypotheses. By consequence, we limit ourselves at this point to the general expectation that different constellations of our three central dimensions at the level of the organisation will lead to different patterns of change and innovation.

Talking about the patterns of change and innovation, we refer on the one hand to the eventual (non-)survival and/or dissemination of the best practice cases in our research population. But on the other hand, we also refer to the patterns leading up to this fate. For example, Weick & Quinn (1999) make an interesting distinction between episodic and continuous change.

[4] However, an accountability regime which focuses too harshly on mistakes and sanctions may discourage entrepreneurship, risk-taking, initiative and creativity, and instead may provoke defensive routines, paralysis and window-dressing (Van Loocke & Put, 2011; Bovens, 2005; Bovens et al., 2008; Behn, 2001; Hartley, 2005).

Continuous change is ongoing, evolving, incremental and cumulative. It is driven by alertness and the inability of organizations to remain stable. The presumption is that self-organizing groups of actors induce continuous modifications of work practices and processes and ways of relating. These ongoing improvisations, adaptations and adjustments are small, frequent and continuous. There is no dramatic discontinuity. Continuous change does not involve a deliberate orchestration of change. The modifications are spontaneous and without explicit a priori intentions or deliberate coordination (Weick & Quinn, 1999).

Episodic change is infrequent, discontinuous and often intentional. A basic metaphor for this type of change is offered by the punctuated equilibrium model. This model depicts organizations as evolving through relatively long periods of stability (equilibrium periods) in their basic patterns of activity that are punctuated by relatively short bursts of fundamental change (revolutionary periods). The presumption is that episodic change occurs during periods of divergence, when organizations are moving away from their equilibrium conditions. This move represents a growing misalignment between the organization and the environmental demands. In other words, episodic change is driven by inertia and the inability of organizations to keep up with the pace of change of the environment (Dunphy, 1996). As adaptation lags, effectiveness decreases, and pressures for change increase. These pressures may result in an episode of fundamental change (revolutionary period). Because episodic change requires both equilibrium/inertia breaking and transitioning to a newly created equilibrium, it is most closely associated with planned, intentional change (Weick & Quinn, 1999; Lam, 2006).[5]

In short, continuous change is driven by alertness and the inability of organizations to remain stable, while episodic change is driven by inertia and the inability of organizations to keep up with the pace of change of the environment. As Weick & Quinn (1999) indicate, researchers have attributed this inability to *inter alia* routines, success-induced blind spots, and culture. Translating this to our own conceptual framework, we could argue that inertia and the inability to keep up are the consequence of:

- the absence of a culture of adversarial debate and of openness for alternative perspectives;
- poor alertness for feedback information;
- intolerance for the questioning of well-established perspectives and long-held assumptions;
- etc.

Thus, a possible specific hypothesis could be that an organization which is characterized by those features would have a high probability to exhibit long periods of inertia, dotted with infrequent but rather drastic episodes of change, while an organization which is characterized by the reverse features would have a high probability to exhibit a continuous style of organizational change.

[5] According to Downs (1967) the distinction between continuous and episodic change is not that clear cut. He asserts that the rate of change is related to its depth. Different 'levels' of an organization change at different speeds and in different patterns. For example, if an organization were in perfect equilibrium with its environment, no one inside or outside of it would want to change its behavior or its formal organizational structure. But environmental changes would soon create performance gaps requiring change. Self-organizing groups of actors within the organization would make frequent and continuous adaptations in their everyday behavior in order to close those gaps. However, these small, continuous adjustments would soon cumulate and create substantial behavioral changes, creating an incongruence between the organization's actual behavior and its formal rules and structures. This would require modifications in the 'deeper' levels of the organization. At first, the organization would change its formal rules without changing its organizational structure. However, as these changes cumulate, an increasing tension would arise between everyday behavior and rules on the one hand and the existing organizational structure on the other. This would lead to relatively infrequent changes in the organization's formal structure, to which Downs refers as 'reorganizational catch-ups' (Downs, 1967).

3. Data & Methods

3.1. Research population

Our research population consists of Belgian and Dutch[6] administrative projects and practices which were recognized as 'best practices' by national and international conferences and awards on excellence, innovation and/or quality in the public sector. We claim that these best practices are reasonable proxies for innovations. Indeed, the novelty of the submitted projects is an often-used criterion in the selection procedure for these conferences and awards. In addition, various researchers, mainly from the USA and Canada, have used public service (innovation) awards in academic research on innovations.[7]

The criteria used to select conferences and awards were the following:

- Recurring prizes and conferences are retained; once off prizes and conferences are not;
- Prizes for innovative or excellent *administrative* projects and practices are retained; prizes for innovative or excellent *policy*-programs are not.

This resulted in the following sources of best practices:

Table 1. International sources of best practice cases

	Editions	Availability of case description
European Public Sector Awards	2007, 2009, 2011, 2013	Limited case descriptions freely available online[8]
CAF: Good Practices Database	No editions; ongoing recognition of best practices since 2006	Case descriptions freely available online[9]
Quality Conferences for Public Administrations in the EU	2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2013	Case descriptions not available online[10]
United Nations Public Service Awards	2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013	Case descriptions freely available online[11]
European Prize for Innovation in Public Administration	2013	Limited case descriptions freely available online[12]
European eGovernment Awards	2003 (eHealth), 2003 (eGov), 2004 (eHealth), 2005 (eGov), 2007 (eGov), 2009 (eGov)	Case descriptions freely available online[13]

[6] This research paper is developed within the framework of WP3 of the LIPSE project. WP3 focuses its research activities on six countries: Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Romania and the UK. For this EGPA-paper, we limited ourselves to Belgium and the Netherlands.

[7] E.g.: Borins, 2000, 2001, 2008; Gow, 1992; Glor, 1998; Rangarajan, 2008; Golden, 1990; Bernier et al., 2014.

[8] Editions 2007 until 2011: http://www.epsa-projects.eu/index.php?title=Special:BrowseData/Projects
Edition 2013: http://www.epsa2013.eu/

[9] http://caf.eipa.eu/3/99/

[10] We had to contact the organizers of the specific conferences and the members of the scientific committees to retrieve the case descriptions of the best practice cases. We would like to express our gratitude to: N. Thijs (Lecturer at the European Institute of Public Administration), J. Nurmi (Ministerial Adviser at the Ministry of Finance, Finland), F. Waintrop (Secrétariat Général de la Modernisation de l'Action Publique, France), and E. Löffler (Chief Executive of Governance International) for providing us these case descriptions.

[11] http://unpan.org/DPADM/UNPSDayAwards/UNPublicServiceAwards/tabid/1522/language/en-US/Default.aspx

[12] http://ec.europa.eu/research/innovation-union/index_en.cfm?section=admin-innovators

Table 2. Belgian and Dutch national sources of best practice cases

Belgian national sources of best practices	Editions	
Conferenties over de Kwaliteit van de Overheidsdiensten in België	2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009	Case descriptions freely available online[14]
Belgische e-Gov Awards	2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013	Case descriptions not available
Dutch national sources of best practices	Editions	
KING Best Gejat Prijs	2011, 2012, 2013	Case descriptions freely available online, but not in a centralized way by the website of the award
PinkRoccade Innovatie Award	2013	
Innovatieprijs voor publieke dienstverlening	2009, 2010	
Innovatieprijs Bedrijfsvoering	2012, 2013	

The criteria used to select best practice cases were the following:

- Cases that received some kind of recognition are included in our research population (for example: cases that received a best practice certificate, a nomination as a finalist, an honorable mention, an award, etc.); mere submissions to awards and conferences that did not receive any kind of recognition were excluded from our research population;
- Cases from 2003 onwards are included in our research population; cases from before 2003 are excluded from our research population;[15]
- Cases that involve one, maximum two public sector organizations are included in our research population; cases that involve networks of organizations are excluded from our research population.[16]

This resulted in 133 Belgian and 58 Dutch best practice cases. However, a substantial number of (mainly Belgian) cases received good or best practice recognition from two or more prizes or conferences. After exclusion of these double or triple cases, we counted 98 Belgian and 56 Dutch unique best practice cases.

3.2. Survey tool

We developed a survey tool to map the patterns of change and innovation for the best practice cases in our research population and to measure the different attributes and (sub-)dimensions of our conceptual framework on the level of the organization.

The first part of the survey focuses on the subsequent life courses of the cases in our research population after their recognition as best practices. We want to know what happened to these innovations in the medium and longer term: Are they still operational today or have they ceased to

[13] http://www.epractice.eu/awards

[14] http://www.publicquality.be/pubqual/joomla/index.php?option=com_wrapper&Itemid=103

[15] The reason for this is that the older the case, the harder it gets to find suitable respondents for our survey (cf. infra).

[16] The reason for this is that the questions of our survey are attuned to assessing the attributes or sub-dimensions of accountability, the learning organization and feedback in one single organization (cf. § 3.2). To measure these in a network of organizations would require a substantially different survey tool.

exist? If they are still operational today, did they survive in their original form or were they transformed over the years? If they ceased to exist, were they actively and explicitly terminated or did they just fade away? If they were actively terminated, were they replaced by something new? And finally, were they adopted by other organizations? We inquire about the subsequent life courses of the cases by means of a number of closed questions. These closed questions are complemented with some open questions, allowing the respondents to elaborate, for example on the nature of the transformations and on the reasons for those transformations.

The remaining parts of the survey try to measure the different (sub-)dimensions of our conceptual framework. For each (sub-)dimension, we confront the respondent with a number of statements. [17] The respondents are asked to describe their own organizations by indicating their level of agreement with each of these statements on a five-point scale. These Likert-scale questions are complemented with a number of multiple choice questions. Appendices 1 to 3 give an overview of the survey items per (sub-)dimension of our conceptual framework.

3.3. Respondents

For each of the best practice cases in our research population, our research team will track down a public official who is willing and able to fill in the questionnaire. The ideal respondent is someone:

- who still works in the organisation
- who was involved in the project/practice from an early stage, preferable in a leading role
- who is sufficiently high in rank within the organisation

4. Results and analysis

At the time of writing, the gathering of the survey data is still ongoing. By consequence, the analysis of the survey data falls outside of the scope of this paper.

[17] Inspiration for the statements was drawn from the following publications: Garvin, D.A., Edmondson, A.C., & Gino, F. (2008). Is yours a learning organization? *Harvard Business Review*, *86*(3), pp. 109-116; Edmondson, A.C. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *44*(2), pp. 350-383.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Survey items for the measurement of the attributes of a learning organization

Attributes of a learning organization	Survey item		Type of survey item
Psychological safety & Transparency & Culture of adversarial debate and openness for alternative perspectives	Q10.a	My organization is characterized by a culture of adversarial debate and openness for constructive criticism.	Five-point scale
	Q10.b	Within my organisation, people are usually comfortable talking about problems, disagreements and differences in opinion.	Five-point scale
	Q10.c	My organisation encourages productive conflict and debate during internal discussions.	Five-point scale
	Q10.d	Within my organisation, well-established perspectives and assumptions are never challenged or questioned.	Five-point scale *
Tolerance for errors, risk-taking and experimentation	Q11.a	My organization is characterized by a tendency to avoid risks.	Five-point scale *
	Q11.b	My organization encourages experimentation and alternative ways of getting work done.	Five-point scale
	Q11.c	If a creative attempt to solve a problem fails, the responsible staff members are penalized.	Five-point scale *
	Q11.d	My organisation has a formal process for conducting and evaluating experiments or new ideas.	Five-point scale
Time for reflection – slack learning	Q12.c	In my organisation, people are too busy to invest time in the improvement of work processes.	Five-point scale *
	Q12.d	Despite the workload, people in my organisation find time to reflect on past performances.	Five-point scale
Diversity of staff	Q12.e	The staff members of my organization have rather homogeneous educational backgrounds.	Five-point scale *
Systematic knowledge management	Q12.a	My organisation systematically keeps records and archives to document past experiences.	Five-point scale
	Q12.b	My organisation has formal procedures to ensure that lessons learned in the course of a project are passed along to others doing similar tasks.	Five-point scale
	Q14.a	My organisation has access to learning platforms that allow (public) organisations to share knowledge and experiences with other (public) organisations.	Five-point scale
	Q14.b	My organisation shares its knowledge and experience with other (public) organisations.	Five-point scale
	Q14.c	My organisation learns from the experiences of other (public) organisations.	Five-point scale
Deliberate measurement practices & Disciplined analysis and interpretation to identify and solve problems	Q13.a	My organisation has monitoring systems that allow it to monitor a wide spectrum of performances and to compare those performances with the stated goals and objectives.	Five-point scale
	Q13.b	If discrepancies between performances and goals are detected, my organisation will take action in order to reduce these discrepancies.	Five-point scale
	Q13.c	My organisation regularly evaluates whether or not the existing organizational goals and objectives are still appropriate.	Five-point scale
	Q13.d	My organisation has a quality management system that systematically strives for continuous improvements throughout the entire organisation.	Five-point scale

Item with an asterisk (*) should be reverse scored.

Appendix 2. Survey items for the measurement of the attributes of public accountability

Attributes of public accountability	Survey item		Type of survey item
Information and reporting	Q15.a	My organisation has an obligation to report about its performances to a higher authority.	Five-point scale
Debate, explanation and justification	Q15.b	My organisation has the opportunity to explain and justify its conduct towards this higher authority.	Five-point scale
Possibility of sanctions	Q15.c	This higher authority has the possibility to penalize my organisation for failing to achieve stated goals or expected performance standards.	Five-point scale
Responsibility for performance	Q15.d	In general, the people of my organisation feel responsible for the performance of the organisation.	Five-point scale
Transparency about performance	Q15.e	Towards external stakeholders, my organisation is very transparent about its results.	Five-point scale
Subject to ombudsman review	Q20	Does your organisation have an ombudsman institution assigned to it?	Yes / No
Subject to external audit	Q25	Does your organisation have an external audit office assigned to it?	Yes / No
Focus of external audit	Q26.a	Degree of attention for compliance with laws and regulations	Five-point scale
	Q26.b	Degree of attention for accuracy and reliability of financial statements	Five-point scale
	Q26.c	Degree of attention for performances and proper management	Five-point scale

Appendix 3. Survey items for the measurement of the sub-dimensions of feedback

Sub-dimensions of feedback		Survey item		Type of survey item
Active search for and processing of feedback information	From staff	Q16.a	My organisation encourages staff members to express their concerns, ideas and suggestions about the functioning of the organisation.	Five-point scale
		Q16.b	The feedback information from staff members is discussed and assessed by our managers in regular meetings.	Five-point scale
	From customers	Q17	How would you describe the complaint management system of your organisation?	Multiple choice
		Q18	How often does your organisation organize a customer satisfaction survey?	Multiple choice
		Q19.a	The feedback information from customers is discussed and assessed by our managers in regular meetings.	Five-point scale
	From ombudsmen	Q21.a	My organisation systematically screens and assesses the feedback information obtained from this ombudsman institution.	Five-point scale
	From internal audit	Q22	Does your organisation have an internal audit office?	Yes / No
		Q23.a	Degree of attention of internal audit office for compliance with laws and regulations	Five-point scale
		Q23.b	Degree of attention of internal audit office for accuracy and reliability of financial statements	Five-point scale
		Q23.c	Degree of attention of internal audit office for performances and proper management	Five-point scale
		Q24.a	My organisation systematically screens and assesses the feedback information obtained from its internal audit office.	Five-point scale
	From external audit	Q27.a	My organisation systematically screens and assesses the feedback information obtained from its external audit office.	Five-point scale
	From evaluation	Q28.a	The reforms in my organisation are periodically subjected to evaluations.	Five-point scale
		Q28.b	My organisation systematically screens and assesses the feedback information obtained from these evaluations.	Five-point scale